



Muranian
VIPs Argo
(Wheeler
Oakman),
Queen Tika
(Dorothy
Christie)
and Mal
(Charles K.
French).

The Phantom Empire: Blazing a Trail to the Autry Empire

by George Turner

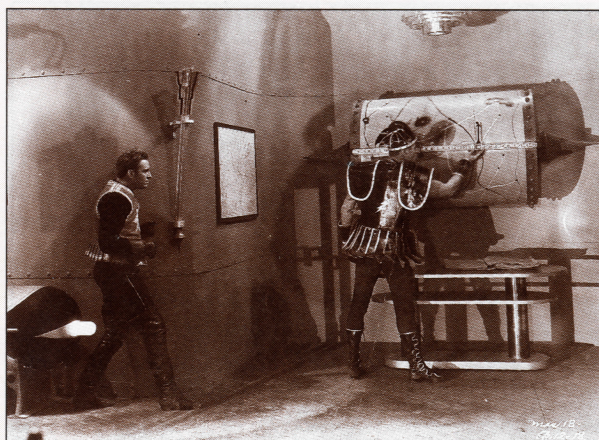
"Blazing the Trail" was the motto of Mascot Picture Corporation, one of a number of small movie companies that were lumped together under the derogatory appellation Poverty Row. At the helm was Nat Levine, a chubby, indefatigable entrepreneur from New York who knew how to produce a "not bad" feature for \$30,000 and a 25-reel serial for \$45,000. Mascot specialized in serials, turning out 31 of them from 1927 through 1935.

Mascot truly blazed the trail in this small but lucrative area of moviemaking. The company made the first sound serial (*King of the Kongo*, 1929), created 12-chapter adaptations of classics (*The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Three Musketeers*, the latter featuring John Wayne as a modern D'Artagnan),

and lured Tom Mix and Rin Tin Tin back to make their only serials. Mascot's most remarkable feat, however, was a crazy-quilt cliffhanger called *The Phantom Empire*, which started new trends and laid the cornerstone for Gene Autry's very real empire.

During the Great Depression of the '30s, many Poverty Row companies collapsed. Mascot stayed afloat, moving out of rented quarters in Metropolitan Studio to set up a production office above a cement company at 2001 Santa Monica Blvd., across the street from the Hollywood Cemetery. Levine made as much use of outdoor and practical settings as possible and leased stage space at rental lots when necessary. Each serial brought in enough profit to permit Levine to seed the next

Left: Gene Autry sneaks up on a missile operator (Leo Willis). Right: Frankie (Darro), Pete (William Moore), Autry and Oscar (Smiley Burnette, in robot disguise), trying to escape, encounter Argo.



one and also lose a bundle on the horses at the Santa Anita racetrack.

In 1934, some time after comedy producer Mack Sennett had declared bankruptcy, Levine leased the former Sennett Studio, a well-equipped 20-acre lot on the Los Angeles River in Studio City, and acquired an adjacent 21 acres to create a larger backlot. To his usual schedule of serials he added a half-dozen or more features per year. The features alone paid for all operational costs while the rentals from four annual serials returned a steady profit. Renting facilities to other independent producers brought in more revenue.

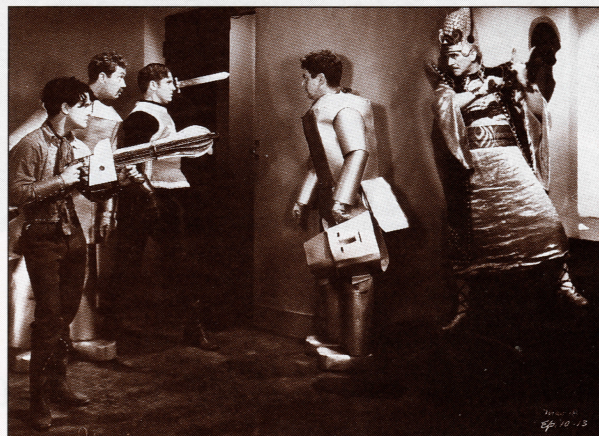
Mascot's only feature-length Western, produced in autumn of 1934, was *In Old Santa Fe*, a satisfying dude-ranch yarn in which star Ken Maynard sang an opening novelty number as he rode. A ten-minute ranch party sequence midway through the show featured Gene Autry, billed on the posters as the "World's Greatest Cowboy Singer," playing a guitar and singing with backup provided by his comical radio pals, hefty Smiley Burnette, diminutive Frankie Marvin and other musicians. The customers liked it.

Levine had met Autry in 1933 in Chicago, where the singer was a featured performer on the National Barn Dance radio show. A former railroad telegraph operator from Tioga, Texas, the peppy and personable Autry had a pleasant singing voice and was a gifted composer of Western ballads. Levine felt that he lacked the acting ability and virility to become a cowboy star, yet he decided to put Autry, Burnette and Marvin under a five-year contract, with Autry starting at \$100 per week, Burnette at \$75 and Marvin at \$60. Under Levine's guidance, Autry spent four months studying with an acting coach and training with two great stunt riders, Yakima Canutt and Yancey Lane.

By the time *In Old Santa Fe* was completed, preparations were under way to begin the Maynard serial *Mystery Mountain*. Unbilled and barely recognizable in minor roles were Autry and Burnette. Autry greatly admired Maynard, but in one coincidentally prophetic chapter, he shot the star out of the saddle.

Maynard, who had run his own production company at Universal, was infuriated by Mascot's fast-and-rough production methods. The serial went a week over its four-week schedule and \$15,000 over its \$65,000 budget, due to Maynard's insistence on making the picture as though he were still at Universal. However, it proved to be Mascot's most profitable serial to date, grossing close to \$1 million. Poverty Row producers weren't accustomed to thinking in such grandiose terms, generally hoping to make only a few thousand dollars in profit after costs. Nevertheless, Levine and Maynard mutually agreed to part ways.

Mascot had already announced a second Maynard serial, *The Phantom Empire*. The popularity of the musical dude ranch format of *In Old Santa Fe* had inspired Levine to develop the idea further into serial form. He asked his associates what they thought of giving Gene Autry the role planned for Maynard. The response was a unanimous "No!" and line producer Armand Schaefer threatened to quit. Yet, some instinct made Levine stick to his



plan: Autry would be co-featured with two athletic juveniles in an expensive (by Mascot standards) Western/science-fiction/musical cliffhanger in 12 chapters. Instead of investing in a costly star — Maynard had cost him an unprecedented (for Poverty Row) \$10,000 a week — he would devote much of the \$70,000 budget to a five-week schedule and spectacular visual effects, the likes of which had never been seen in a serial.

The original story is credited to Wallace MacDonald, a Silent Era leading man who had been reduced to playing heavies in the Talkies. He began writing Westerns for Columbia and soon embarked upon a new career as a story editor and screenwriter at Mascot. He later was supervisor of writers for Republic and by the late 1930s he had become a successful producer at Columbia, where his many pictures included several Boris Karloff and Peter Lorre pictures and the film noir classic *My Name is Julia Ross*.

MacDonald said he had been browsing through a brochure about Carlsbad Caverns while

in the waiting room of a dentist's office. Moments later, while under the influence of "laughing gas," he envisioned a race of people living in cities deep in the caverns. This idea, coupled with legends of the lost continents of Atlantis and Mu, was developed into *The Phantom Empire* by MacDonald, Gerald Geraghty, Hy Freedman and Maurice Geraghty.

A wilder and more preposterous screenplay had never been concocted, a less influential producer would have been difficult to find, and a less likely star could hardly have been imagined. Although he co-featured Autry below the title with two youngsters, Levine made certain that the audience would be continually reminded of his name by casting him as a singing radio cowboy named Gene Autry! The same practice would be followed in all but one of Autry's subsequent pictures.

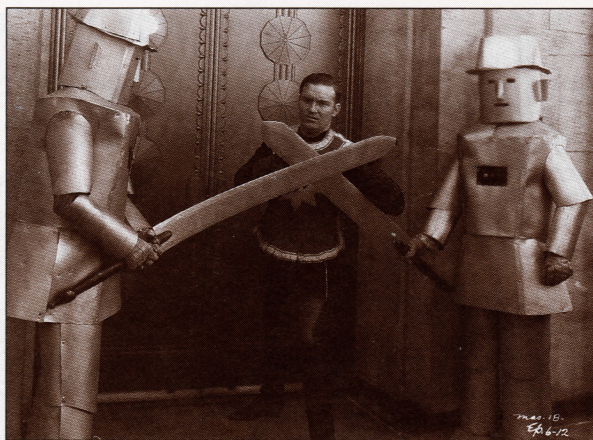
The juveniles were Frankie Darro, star of several earlier Mascots, and Betsy King Ross. No doubles were needed for this pair, who were daredevil riders. Seventeen-year-old Darro's short stature kept him in child roles, but he was a seasoned actor and vaudeville athlete who arrived at the studio in his convertible, smoking a cigarette. Betsy, a cute, freckled 12-year-old billed as the "World's Champion Stunt Rider," came to Hollywood in 1933 to appear in Fox's *Smoke Lightning* and stayed on for Mascot's *Fighting with Kit Carson*.

Somehow, it all clicked. Mascot's mélange made a lot of money and had a powerful impact on the future of two segments of the film industry, the Western and the serial. It also established Autry as a major box-office attraction and became the corner-



stone of his vast financial empire.

The story of *The Phantom Empire* is complex, combining the standard Western formula (a gang of crooks trying to seize control of a ranch) the discovery of a lost civilization in the bowels of the earth, as well as an utterly ridiculous cliffhanger subplot in which Autry must get back to ranch headquarters each afternoon so he can host a radio broadcast! During the course of all this there are two car wrecks, an airplane crash, innumerable



Left: Scientists prepare a flying torpedo; Right: Autry is denied egress by two ridiculous robots. The scene was photographed on the roof of the unfinished Griffith Observatory.

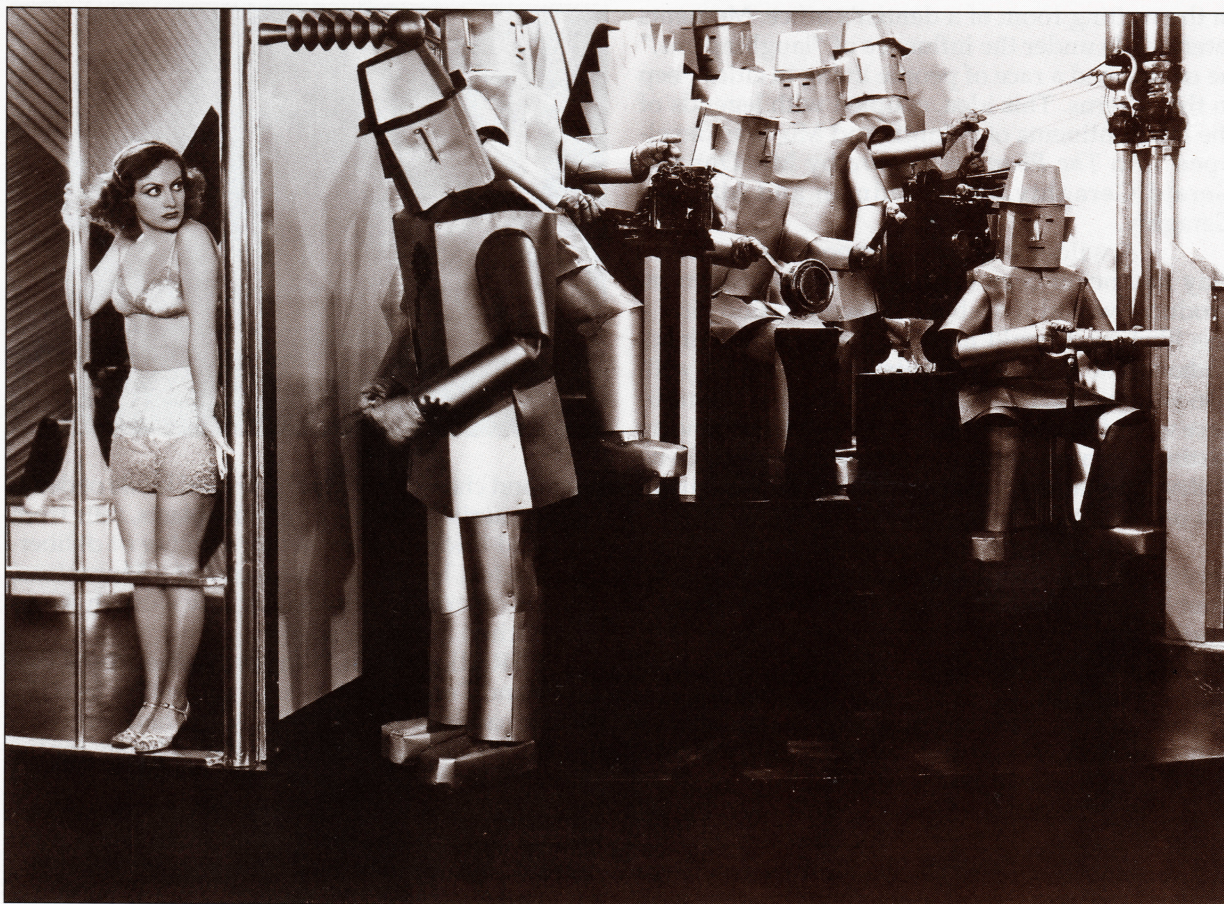
fight and chases, swordplay, several kinds of death rays, an aerial torpedo, dynamite blasts, falls from cliffs and bridges, a surprising number of deliberate murders by the scientists and the Muranians, and the destruction of the lost city — with songs sandwiched in-between.

Radio Ranch, a resort owned by Gene Autry and Tom Baxter, is kept solvent by its daily radio broadcasts featuring Autry and his Radio Riders. Unless Gene appears each day at 2 p.m. for the show, the radio contract will be cancelled and the ranch will be lost. Tom's teenaged youngsters, Frankie (Darro) and Betsy (King Ross), are almost captured by a band of masked and caped horsemen who make a sound like thunder as they ride. The riders are from Murania, a scientific city built 20,000 feet below the surface during the First Ice Age and ruled by the beautiful Queen Tika (Dorothy Christie).

A band of crooks led by Professor Beetson (Frank Glendon) arrives by airplane, intent upon getting rid of Autry so that the ranch will become deserted and they can search for the vast radium deposits they have detected. They ambush Gene, leaving him for dead. Frankie and Betsy find Gene and all three are pursued by Thunder Riders. They fall from a cliff but hang onto a bush and are rescued by the Junior Thunder Riders, a group organized by the Baxter kids.

Beetson murders Tom and frames Autry, who escapes from both the Sheriff and the Thunder Riders. Surviving a car crash, Gene gets back to the ranch just in time for his broadcast. Eventually, Gene, Betsy and Frankie fall into the hands of the Muranians. Tika orders Gene's execution, fearing contamination of her peaceful realm by the warlike surface people. Argo (Wheeler Oakman), the treacherous prime minister, saves Gene from the death chamber. Autry is to be dissected by the scientific genius, Rab (Warner Richmond), to determine why he can breathe the air of the surface (unlike the Muranians, who must wear oxygen masks if they go outside). After escaping and surviving fights with robots and soldiers, Gene is killed in a radium explosion. At Tika's command Rab brings

The Muranian robots previously appeared with Joan Crawford in the MGM musical comedy Dancing Lady.



him back to life.

Gene and the kids fight their way back to the surface and flee in Beetson's airplane, narrowly escaping death after a Muranian ray causes it to crash. After further encounters with the Beetson gang, Autry, the kids, and two cowhands, Pete (Smiley Burnette) and Oscar (William Moore) are again imprisoned in Murania.

When Argo's revolt begins, Gene and his friends rescue Tika. Argo's disintegrating ray gets out of control and commences to destroy Murania. Tika elects to perish with her city as Gene and his group escape. Returning to the ranch in time for their radio show, they then trick a confession from Beetson, who admits he also has murdered two of his own men.

By the time *The Phantom Empire* was under way, Autry had become an expert horseman. The picture contains many camera car shots of skillful fast riding by Autry alone as well as with the two juveniles, in which no stunt doubles were used. His acting in this fledgling effort is elemental, with an emphasis on precise enunciation at the expense of expression, but he's fine in the action and musical sequences. Most importantly, he comes across as a pleasant and likeable presence. There's something satisfying about watching an average-looking guy out-ride and out-fight a formidable lot of heavies and still be able to grab a guitar and sing.

Burnette and William Moore provide cornball comedy as a pair of klutzy cowboy musicians. Blonde Dorothy Christy, best remembered as Stan Laurel's shrewish wife in *Sons of the Desert*, is an attractive Queen Tika, although a bit down-to-earth for an exotic role. Effective villainy is provided by Warner Richmond, Wheeler Oakman and Frank Glendon. Among the Muranians are sometime action stars Wally Wales, Jay (Buffalo Bill Jr.) Wilsey, Richard Talmadge, Yakima Canutt and Wally West.

Outdoor action was photographed largely in hill country west of the San Fernando Valley, along the present site of the Ventura Freeway; among the towering rocks of what is now Chatsworth Park; and in Bronson Canyon, a former granite quarry in the Hollywood Hills. One of the four entrances to a mine tunnel which runs through a prominence in the center of the quarry became the secret entrance to Murania. A door was made of lath and chicken wire covered with papier mache and plaster, which was formed and painted to seem a part of the rocky cliff. It could be raised (supposedly by a robot turning a windlass) to allow the Thunder Riders to emerge or enter.

Much of Murania was photographed in and on the Griffith Observatory and Planetarium, then nearing completion several hilltops east of Bronson Canyon. The site later became venerated by James Dean fans as the setting of a fight sequence



in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The futuristic design of the complex structure was ideally suited to the architecture of an imaginary scientific city. Autry and his sidekicks fought Muranian heavies all over the building, which features unusual bronze doors, stairways ascending the rounded exterior, art deco battlements and copper domes. Some interiors were utilized as well.

As was customary in the serial field, two directors and two directors of photography were employed, preparing and shooting on alternate days. Directors Otto Brower and B. Reeves (Breezy) Eason were veteran action specialists who also directed second-unit sequences for epic films. Eason's work includes the chariot race in the 1926 *Ben Hur*, and Brower directed the second units of *Suez* and *Charge of the Light Brigade*. Serving as assistant director was Levine's former office boy, 19-year-old William Witney, who later became a top action director.

The cinematography of serial veterans Ernest Miller, ASC and William Nobles is of a high quality when the breakneck schedule of making a 25-reel show in five weeks is considered. Exteriors were filmed from sunup to sundown each day without resorting to booster lights (an unnecessary expense in Levine's view). Metal foil reflectors were used to deflect some sunlight into faces and shadow areas. There are some artistic lighting effects in the Muranian interiors, including huge shadows of machinery and actors cast on the walls. Tricky camera angles emphasize the unusual architecture of the observatory building.

Special properties, such as death rays and laboratory equipment, are also impressive. The robots, however, are more comical than menacing. This is hardly surprising: the seven suits, which were found at Western Costume, had made their 1933 debut with Joan Crawford in MGM's musical comedy *Dancing Lady*. They seemed even more insipid in 1952 when Columbia resurrected them for another serial, *Captain Video*.

Inventive special effects made the total vision of Murania possible. The miniatures of the city, supervised by technical director Jack Coyle, pro-

vided a great variety of vistas featuring graceful metallic buildings, bridges, elevators, lakes, and tiny pedestrians moving along lofty walkways. This was the work of 23-year-old Howard Lydecker Jr., who was destined to become a legend in the special effects field. Even Universal's far more expensive (and, in other respects, better) *Flash Gordon* serials contain no model work comparable to the vast Muranian cityscape.

Astonishingly, Murania was built for less than \$1200. Many of the structures were constructed with kitchen utensils, plastered over and painted. The dome of one prominent building had been a vegetable strainer. Rings of fluorescent tubing were used for an elevator shaft. Painters be-



tween assignment on other shows were recruited to apply the finishing touches.

Nor can any other serial boast of projection process work as diverse and well executed as that in *The Phantom Empire*. The credit belongs to Ellis "Bud" Thackery, ASC, a versatile cinematographer who had worked for visual effects genius Willis O'Brien on *King Kong* and *The Son of Kong* during 1932-33.

"That's why Nat Levine wanted me, because of my work on the *Kong* pictures," Thackery told us. "We had used miniature rear projection for the first time to place live people into the little sets with the ape and dinosaurs. I worked with that as well as with the full-scale back projection and other forms of compositing."

Miniature projection, invented and patented by O'Brien in 1930, involved photographing action with the cast in partial sets, then projecting it onto the backs of tiny translucent screens mounted on frames and concealed in matching miniature sets. Special little projectors were hand-tooled by Harry Cunningham for the purpose. Regular translucent projection screen material was too grainy for such close shots, so finer-grained materials such as latex were stretched on frames and the small screens were vibrated rapidly during photography to "erase" the grain.

In *The Phantom Empire* the process is used to place the throne room and its occupants into

Left: In spite of their super-scientific weapons, Argo's followers fight Autry and Darro with swords and spears. Right: Oscar, Pete, Gene, Betsy (King Ross) are captives in the throne room. Two former cowboy stars are guards — Buffalo Bill Jr. (far left) and Wally Wales (holding Darro).

Autry is horrified by what he sees on the queen's television set almost 60 years before the debut of Beavis and Butt-head. The man with the mike is Stan Blystone.



expansive Lydecker surroundings and to show Muranian scientists working in seemingly huge, intricately detailed laboratories with many wheels and pumps in operation. It also made possible one superbly scaled setup in which a technician launches flying torpedoes from a huge domed room. All of these scenes are flawless. Full-scale back projection is also used frequently to place miniature settings behind live action, such as when Autry fights Muranians on a high bridge. A matte painting is employed to provide the throne room with a glass upper wall and a view of the city.

Closed-circuit, cameraless television is depicted via projection or matte shots in numerous scenes. Queen Tika's throne room TV screen is at the bottom of a large circular pit in the floor. Matte shots are utilized to show views looking straight down at the action on the televisor, with the queen in the foreground.

A clever trick is used to depict an airplane crashing over a cliff: the camera pans rapidly with a real airplane as it speeds out of sight behind rocks and trees; as the camera swings past the obstructions, we see a miniature plane emerge and plunge over the edge. The camera then swings down past more obscuring rocks to pick up a full-scale crashed plane (including Autry) at the foot of the precipice.

A startling effect is utilized in the final chapter to show Murania being destroyed by the "ultimate weapon." Frames from the film were enlarged onto glass stereopticon plates coated with a specially formulated thick emulsion. A heating unit behind the upright plate melted the emulsion while a movie camera photographed the deteriorating image in slow motion. It is mesmerizing to watch buildings, caves and even Queen Tika (seated regally on her throne) distort, smear and melt away.

Mascot serials always featured optical title art, with lettering superimposed over action backgrounds. *The Phantom Empire* titles feature seven scenes of Murania and four of the Thunder Riders. At the end of Episode One a 40-second trailer plugs the excitement to come in the next 11 weeks. These were done by Consolidated Film Industries (CFI), who did all of Mascot's lab work and prints, usu-

ally on a cost-deferred basis.

Aside from the songs, there is little music in the serial. The theme for Murania is "Zanzibar," by Henry Hadley, the distinguished composer-conductor and founder of the Berkshire Music Festival. The chapter synopses are accompanied by Charles Dunworth's familiar *misterioso*, "Stealthy Footsteps."

As for Autry, his subsequent career flourished beyond all expectations. When Mascot, Monogram and several other independent companies merged with Consolidated Film Industries in 1935 to form Republic Pictures Corporation, *Westward Ho!* (starring John Wayne) and Autry's *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* were the first two Westerns made by the new company.

Following his three Mascot appearances, Autry starred in 91 feature films: 58 for Republic, one for Twentieth Century-Fox and 32 for Columbia produced by his Gene Autry Productions. In 1940 he was voted the Number One Western Star by the Theatre Exhibitors of America and was named the fourth-largest box-office star (following Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable). He toured the country twice a year with his own show; had a weekly radio program, *Melody Ranch*, for 16 years; headed Flying A Productions, for which he starred in 91 TV episodes of *The Gene Autry show*; and also produced several other series (*Annie Oakley*, *The Range Rider*, *Buffalo Bill Jr.*, *Cavalcade of America*, *The Adventures of Champion*) as well as the first 39 segments of *Death Valley Days*. He also hosted 93 segments of *Melody Ranch Theatre*, featuring his movies.

Autry recorded more than 300 songs, about one-third of which he also wrote (mostly with Burnette or Fred Rose). His recording of "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine" was the industry's first official gold record; other million-plus sellers include "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," "South of the Border," "Back in the Saddle Again," "You Are My Sunshine" and "Mexicali Rose." His song "Be Honest With Me" received an Academy Award nomination. His recording of "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" has sold over 25 million copies (second only to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas") and two records for children, "Peter Cottontail" and "Here Comes Santa Claus," have sold more than two million copies each.

In the meantime, he bought interests in large ranches in Arizona, Texas and Oklahoma, two Phoenix newspapers and the Madison Square Garden Rodeo, as well as several recording and music publishing companies, hotels and motels. An Oklahoma town, formerly Berwyn, is named after him. For years he collected royalties from millions of Gene Autry comic books, daily and Sunday cartoon strips, and about 50 commercial products.

Golden West Broadcasters, which Autry and Bob Reynolds formed in 1952, owns several broadcast facilities, including KTLA Television and

In a twist on the typical serial rhubarb, Autry battles sword-wielding soldiers and sledge-hammer-swinging robots.



KMPC Radio, which occupy the former Warner Bros. Studio on Sunset Boulevard. Autry is also principal owner of the California Angels, an American League pro baseball team, and a stockholder in the Los Angeles Rams pro football team. In 1988 he founded the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, an outstanding institution in Los Angeles dedicated to the history of the American West.

That this multimillion-dollar empire was founded upon a \$500 job in a \$70,000 serial from Poverty Row is almost as mind-boggling as *The Phantom Empire* itself. "I was very fortunate," Autry has said. "Everybody thought we were crazy. I had no idea what that picture would do." ❧

A Mascot serial in 12 chapters; produced by Nat Levine; directed by Otto Brower, Breezy Eason; supervised by Armand Schaefer; story by Wallace MacDonald, Gerald Geraghty, Hy Freedman; continuity by John Rathmell, Armand Schaefer; photography, Ernest Miller, ASC, William Nobles, ASC; edited by Earl Turner; associate editor, Walter Thompson; sound engineer, Terry Kellum; musical director, Arthur Kay; songs: "In a Vine Covered Cottage" ("That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine"), "Uncle Noah's Ark," "Just Come on In," "I'm Oscar," "No Need to Worry," "Uncle Henry's Vacation," "Moon-eye View of the World" by Gene Autry, Smiley Burnette; settings by Mack D'Agostino, Ralph M. DeLacy, Jack Coyle; special effects, Howard Lydecker Jr., Billy Gilbert; photographic effects, Ellis "Bud" Thackery, ASC; added photography, William Bradford, ASC; costumes, Iris Burns; assistant direc-

tor, William Witney; musical themes, Henry Hadley, Hugo Riesenfeld, Charles Dunworth; recorded by International Sound Recording Company; titles and opticals by Consolidated Film Industries. Running time, 242.30 minutes.

Gene, Gene Autry; Frankie, Frankie Darro; Betsy, Betsy King Ross; Queen Tika, Dorothy Christy; Argo, Wheeler Oakman; Mal, Charles K. French; Rab, Warner Richmond; Professor Beetson, Frank Glendon; Dr. Cooper, Edward Piel Sr.; Oscar, Lester (Smiley) Burnette; Pete, William Moore; Cowboy, Frankie Marvin; Saunders, Jack Carlyle; Radio Technician, Don Brodie; Muranians, Wally Wales, James C. Eagles, Fred Burns, Jay Wilsey, Stanley Blystone, Richard Talmadge, Frank Ellis, Henry Hall, Yakima Canutt, Bruce Mitchell, Rodney Hildebrand, Jim Corey, Wally West, George Magrill, Bob Card, Captain J. King Ross.

Chapter titles: 1) The Singing Cowboy; 2) The Thunder Riders; 3) The Lightning Chamber; 4) The Phantom Broadcast; 5) Beneath the Earth; 6) Disaster From the Skies; 7) From Death to Life; 8) Jaws of Jeopardy; 9) Prisoners of the Ray; 10) The Rebellion; 11) A Queen in Chains; 12) The End of Murania.

Feature version entitled Radio Ranch adapted by Gerald Geraghty and Maurice Geraghty; released May 2, 1940 by Mascot Pictures; released simultaneously in New York by Times Films as Men With Steel Faces. Running time, 70 minutes.

The author is much obliged to Gene Autry, the late Frankie Darro, Jan Alan Henderson, Michael H. Price, the late Lester Shorr and the late Bud Thackery for information used in this article.